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THE DEVELOPMENT OF FUNCTIONAL AND EQUIVALENCE CLASSES IN HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISTIC CHILDREN: THE ROLE OF NAMING

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The development of functional and equivalence classes was studied in four high-functioning, preschool-aged autistic children. Initially, all subjects failed to demonstrate match-to-sample relations indicative of stimulus equivalence among two three-member classes of visual stimuli. Then, 2 subjects showed emergence of those relations after they were taught to assign the same name to all members in each class. Next, subjects were taught names for new stimuli outside the match-to-sample format. On subsequent match-to-sample tests, 2 subjects demonstrated untrained conditional relations among the stimuli given a common name. New, unnamed stimuli were then related via match-to-sample training to stimuli from sets of named stimuli. Tests for emergent conditional relations between the new unnamed stimuli and the named stimuli yielded positive results for 1 subject and somewhat mixed results for 3 subjects. Finally, without naming, 2 subjects developed stimulus equivalence among two new three-member classes of visual stimuli. These data suggest that naming may remediate failures to develop untrained conditional relations, some of which are indicative of stimulus equivalence.

Key words: equivalence classes, functional classes, naming, conditional discrimination, discrimination, matching to sample, autistic children

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ON THE ORIGINS OF NAMING AND OTHER SYMBOLIC BEHAVIOR

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We identify *naming* as the basic unit of verbal behavior, describe the conditions under which it is learned, and outline its crucial role in the development of stimulus classes and, hence, of symbolic behavior. Drawing upon B. F. Skinner's functional analysis and the theoretical work of G. H. Mead and L. S. Vygotsky, we chart how a child, through learning listener behavior and then echoic responding, learns bidirectional relations between classes of objects or events and his or her own speaker-listener behavior, thus acquiring naming—a higher order behavioral relation. Once established, the bidirectionality incorporated in naming extends across behavior classes such as those identified by Skinner as the *mand, tact,* and *intraverbal* so that each becomes a variant of the name relation. We indicate how our account informs the specification of rule-governed behavior and provides the basis for an experimental analysis of symbolic behavior. Furthermore, because naming is both evoked by, and itself evokes, *classes* of events it brings about new or *emergent* behavior such as that reported in studies of stimulus equivalence. This account is supported by data from a wide range of match-to-sample studies that also provide evidence that stimulus equivalence in humans is not a unitary phenomenon but the outcome of a number of different types of naming behavior.

Key words: naming, verbal behavior, language, symbolic behavior, stimulus equivalence, listener behavior, rule governance, speech for self, consciousness, match to sample, children

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